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What Produced Four Lynchings in Duluth, Minnesota in 1918 and 1920?

Gabriel Das

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of  
Arts in History at Pomona College

April 23, 2021

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the context of Duluth, Minnesota between the years 1918 and 1920, and how the history, politics, and society of Duluth contributed to two separate lynchings within two years of each other. A brief history of Duluth will be established which describes its demographics, race relations, politics, and work environment in the early 20th century. The lynchings will be discussed in chronological order. Olli Kinkkonen's murder in 1918 is analyzed within the context of World War One, nationalism, workers' rights, and anti-Finnish sentiment in Northern Minnesota. The lynchings of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie will be explained in the context of racism, civil unrest, and lynch mobs. Corruption of the press and law enforcement is a significant theme in both instances.

## **Preface and Acknowledgements**

I was born in Maplewood, Minnesota, and was raised in Saint Paul. My father was born and raised in Duluth, Minnesota. Growing up, I spent many weekends visiting my grandparents in Duluth. After I enrolled at Pomona College, I would go back to Minnesota and stay with my grandparents during breaks. In my spring semester of junior year, I took a class called Power in the U.S. The final project was intended to focus on local public histories in Southern California. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, I was forced to relocate to Duluth, Minnesota in March of 2020. I was inclined to research a topic local to Minnesota, so I started researching the Duluth lynchings of 1920. It was nearly 100 years after the day three young black men were murdered for being falsely accused of a crime. I was exploring public interpretations of the Clayton Jackson McGhie Memorial located downtown near the spot of the lynchings. I concluded that the memorial marked a significant shift in the attitude toward the lynchings over time, but it did not explicitly state the role race had in the tragedy. After the death of George Floyd while in the custody of Minneapolis police on May 25, 2020, I was reminded of the significant problem of racism in my home state of Minnesota. Though widely recognized as a progressive state, Minnesota has a history of racial conflict which dates to when the land was forcibly ceded from the Sioux people. In the War of 1862, thirty-eight Dakota men were hanged in Mankato, Minnesota under the order of Abraham Lincoln. More hangings would go on to occur in the state, legally or not. Though I was initially motivated to research something which was not related to social issues for my senior thesis, I could not help but gravitate toward the subject of civil injustice, especially in a time of heightened social awareness across the world. I decided to expand upon my

research of the 1920 Duluth lynchings to examine the lesser known 1918 lynching of Olli Kinkkonen, and explain what it was about Duluth, and the United States, that allowed these tragedies to occur in the same period.

I appreciate the feedback and recommendations for my research from Professor April Mayes, chair of the history department at Pomona College. Thanks to Professors Skyler Reidy and Tomas Summers-Sandoval of Pomona College for being my readers. I am grateful to all individuals who researched the lynchings of Duluth before me.

## **Introduction**

When one thinks of Minnesotan history, lynchings likely do not immediately come to mind. One might instead think of white settlement, the U.S.-Dakota conflict of 1862, or railroad development. It is true that lynchings have not composed a significant part of Minnesota's history. Although lynchings in the United States are largely synonymous with anti-black aggression, most of the 20 lynching victims in Minnesota were white and Native American. Three victims were black. This is not to say that race did not factor into the lynchings of the three black men. I am bringing attention to the fact that in all recorded history, the only three black victims of lynching in Minnesota occurred on the same day. Remarkably, these lynchings occurred in the same city as the lynching of an immigrant two years prior. Duluth does not have a reputation for being prejudiced or violent. It is a predominantly progressive city relative to other areas in Minnesota outside of the Twin Cities. The late 1910s and early 1920s was a tumultuous period in the United States. America was involved in World War One, there was an influenza pandemic in 1918, and civil unrest occurred in several major cities during the Red Summer of 1919. Duluth, like many cities, experienced its share of racism, nationalism, and fear. In addition, there was manipulation and corruption on the part of authorities and the press. At the time, newspapers were a primary way of receiving information. Much like in television production, the producers of newspapers imposed a dominant narrative which was intended to be adopted by the masses. The press worked with authorities who, despite their roles to serve the people, ultimately failed at enforcing a safe and ethical environment.

The 1920 Duluth lynchings of three black circus workers accused of rape made national headlines after it happened. It was shocking to Americans that a racist phenomenon which was so prevalent in the Deep South could ever occur in a place like Minnesota. One hundred years later, the lynchings of Clayton, Jackson, and McGhie remain unknown to most people. It seems that over time, Minnesotans tried to move past the dark spot in its history. More is unknown about the lynching which occurred two years earlier of Olli Kinkkonen, an immigrant from Finland who was labeled a “slacker” for avoiding the draft and murdered by a gang of nationalists. By considering the context of the time these men were lynched, I will discuss the societal, cultural, and political elements of Duluth which culminated in the murders of an immigrant and three African American men.

Between 1889 and 1918, at least 3,224 people were lynched across the United States. Two-hundred nineteen victims were lynched in northern states. Seventy-nine percent of all lynching victims were black. Many white people viewed black people as threats, and lynching was a form of “control” over an unwelcome black presence. The Great Migration started in 1916, when black people from the rural South moved into urban areas in the Northeast and the Midwest trying to find work. Since black people worked for less money and took the jobs of people on strike, white workers in the North were hostile toward black migrants.<sup>1</sup> This hostility led to the Red Summer of 1919, when lynchings and 25 race riots occurred across the United States. White rioters damaged black communities as a response to alleged black criminality. Lynchings were a justified punishment for black men who were accused of raping a white woman. Many times,

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<sup>1</sup> “Background,” Minnesota Historical Society, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/background>.



allegations against black individuals were not based on substantial evidence. All that was needed to incriminate a black person was an accusation by a white person. Black people were also targeted for trivial reasons, not necessarily for being accused of a crime. Black individuals who did not “stay in their place” gave white people a reason to target entire black communities, not just the individual involved. The Duluth Lynchings of 1920 were a continuation of the violence toward black people in the late 19th century and early 20th century. The events were followed by published skepticism of the justification for the lynchings, condemnation of mob violence, and campaigns for civil rights. These actions were not unprecedented. Ida B. Wells started her anti-lynching campaign after the lynchings of three African American men in 1892. The men had been defending their community grocery store in Memphis from an armed white mob before they were arrested for “maintaining a public nuisance”. Later that night, seventy-five members of a white mob broke into the jail, took the three men outside of the city, and killed them. Wells was a good friend of one of the men who was murdered, and she was inspired to write about her opposition to lynch mobs. She expressed her skepticism in the Memphis Free Speech about accusations such as white women being raped by black men.<sup>2</sup> She then investigated the justifications for other lynchings and published her findings in her pamphlet called *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases*, for which she faced threats forcing her to leave Memphis for New York. The response to her publications shows the power that the media had in generating powerful emotions that could lead to mass mobilization. The parallels between the 1892 lynchings in Memphis and the 1920

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<sup>2</sup> “The University of Chicago Library,” A Voice for Justice - The University of Chicago Library, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/voice-for-justice-life-and-legacy-ida-b-wells/mob-violence-and-anti-lynching-campaign/>.

lynchings in Duluth are apparent. Wells' friend, Nellie Griswold Francis, an activist from Saint Paul, led a campaign for an anti-lynching bill in Minnesota after the Duluth lynchings, and succeeded in getting the bill signed into law on April 21, 1921. The bill calls for the removal of police officers who fail to protect prisoners from lynch mobs.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, no national anti-lynching bill was ever passed.

In my thesis I examine newspaper articles that discuss or led to mob violence. Some of these articles are related to the 1920 lynchings and were published in local newspapers. One of the articles comes from the Duluth Herald and is responsible for spreading the false accusation that a white woman was raped by six black circus workers. Another article was published over a week after the lynchings happened and gives context that provides a more truthful story of what led up to the lynchings. An article from the Bottineau Courant describes the lynching of Olli Kinkkonen and identifies the group responsible for his murder.

Newspaper articles published in the late 1910's and early 1920's can help one infer what sort of attitudes existed in Duluth, Minnesota which led to four people being lynched. Language analysis reveals why two instances of lynchings occurred within two years of each other in Duluth, a city located in the northern part of Minnesota where lynching was less common than in the South. An investigation of this issue will produce information about the social and political environment in Duluth. It is too simple to say that Olli Kinkkonen was murdered for avoiding the draft, or that Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie were victims of angry racists who were caught up in the moment. A complete context of the period in the United States is required to explain the

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<sup>3</sup> "Campaign for Anti-Lynching Legislation," Minnesota Historical Society, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/afterwards.php>.

social, political, and cultural conditions that led to the deaths of four individuals. These lynchings remain obscure to most of the American public. In my thesis I examine historical articles from local newspapers in Duluth, as well as papers from outside of Minnesota to explain why two mobs conducted four lynchings within a span of two years. From the newspaper articles I analyzed, another picture of Duluth emerges, one that illustrates the complex and violent past of a now quiet and tolerant city.

Scholarly knowledge of the Duluth lynchings has advanced very far in the last two decades. A growing number of people are aware of the injustices that were committed in Duluth. I have examined three works which contributed to my understanding of why the lynchings happened through the authors' own analyses of historical newspapers. Each author comes to their own conclusions about what created a lynch mob. Their conclusions are interconnected because they relate the content of historical newspapers to the demographics of the people who read them. It can be inferred that many white readers of the newspaper felt a responsibility to act and punish black people for a perceived attack on a white woman.

In *Legacy Of Violence: Lynch Mobs And Executions In Minnesota* by John D. Bessler, the intersection of race and punishment is emphasized in the history of lynching in Minnesota. Bessler describes the 1920 lynchings as hate crimes, evidenced by a publication from the Chicago Tribune that attributed motivations of the lynch mob to "sex protection" and "race instinct". Furthermore, the publication states that the race of the accused men was important in the "psychology of the outbreak".<sup>4</sup> Although the

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<sup>4</sup> John D. Bessler, "Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs And Executions in Minnesota," in *Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs And Executions in Minnesota* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. xviii.

newspaper that Bessler cited is from Chicago, it can be inferred that the motives presented in the Chicago Tribune are accurate given the dominant narrative of white-owned media sources in the Midwest. Bessler also mentions a news article from Minnesota in 1911 which attributed the rise in lynchings to the abolishment of the death penalty in Minnesota. Life sentences were not enough for some crimes. Pro-death penalty bills up to 1919 failed to pass. This may explain why the mob in Duluth in 1920 was frustrated to the point that they decided to punish the accused black men themselves.

Kristin Gustafson states in “Constructions of Responsibility for Three 1920 Lynchings in Minnesota Newspapers” that newspapers in the 1920’s upheld the dominant narrative while silencing the minority. This was done by excluding information and ideas of people from a marginalized background. The rapid nature of news publications was dependent on using stereotypes and other common beliefs that would effectively transmit information to most readers.<sup>5</sup> Gustafson’s article is useful for analyzing how the Duluth Herald contributed to the formation of a mob in West Duluth. The diminishing of black men to stereotypes in a brief account of a rape accusation was effective at angering enough white people to unify and overpower the police. Gustafson’s argument is useful in understanding the impact that the media had in creating a lynch mob when they published the story of the attack at the circus. However, more historical context is needed to explain the origins of the hegemony that existed in Duluth in the 1920’s.

*The Lynchings in Duluth* by Michael Fedo is a book that gives a detailed account of the events in 1920. The author suggests that tensions were building up between whites

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<sup>5</sup> Kristin L. Gustafson, “Constructions of Responsibility for Three 1920 Lynchings in Minnesota Newspapers,” *Journalism History* 34, no. 1 (2008): pp. 42-53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00947679.2008.12062755>, 48.

and blacks in Duluth due to the influx of black workers to the steel mill. Additionally, white veterans of World War One supplied stories of black soldiers engaging in affairs with white women overseas. These young white men felt like their heroism was forgotten about and yearned for another cause to fight for at home. Fedo mentions the article by the Duluth Herald that was released in the early evening of June 15th which describes the alleged attack on James Sullivan and Irene Tusken the previous night by six black circus workers. Though the story was mentioned in the newspaper headline, it was not the lead story and took up only one column. In 250 words, it gave a similar account to the one given to investigators earlier that morning.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps due to the limitations of the new investigation, the simplifications of the newspaper story were due to a lack of facts rather than an intentional omission thereof. Regardless, some black readers of the paper knew that there was going to be a lynching. There is no doubt that the spread of the story led to the creation of a lynch mob.

My analysis of the above three sources provides some historical context to the Duluth lynchings of 1920. This is one part of my thesis which considers the lynching of Olli Kinkkonen in 1918. Bessler, Gustafson, and Fedo detail the prologue to the 1920 lynchings in each of their works. I connect all their points in addition to my own research to prove that the Duluth lynchings were a culmination of conservative, white-American preservation in a time of heightened paranoia and violence which disproportionately targeted marginalized people.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael W. Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), 60.

## **Chapter One: Overview of Duluth, Minnesota**

Duluth is a harbor city located in northeast Minnesota. It is the largest metropolitan area on Lake Superior. It has a population of nearly 86,000, making it the fourth largest city in Minnesota. White people make up roughly 90% of the population. Black people are just over 2% of the population. The racial makeup of Duluth has not changed substantially over the last century, though diversity has slightly increased over time. The dominant culture and perspective of Duluth can be inferred to have been centered around the white population in the early 20th century. This is important to consider when studying the formation of anti-blackness which developed as blacks migrated into the city.

In 1920, Duluth's population had nearly doubled over the last twenty years due to the influx of immigrants attempting to find work in the shipping and manufacturing industries. Out of 100,000 residents, nearly one third were born in Europe. In addition, there was a small black community of 495 people. Few black people held prominent positions in Duluth. There were some successful black-owned businesses, but most black people in the city worked as porters, janitors, and waiters.<sup>7</sup> Many black workers were recruited from the South by the United States Steel Corporation to work at the U.S. Steel plant in Duluth between 1916 and 1918 due to the shortage of workers during the war. Minnesota steel officials believed that black workers were less likely to go on strike or join labor organizations. White residents in West Duluth, a part of the city filled with first- and second-generation immigrants from southeastern Europe, resented the

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<sup>7</sup> "Duluth Lynchings," Minnesota Historical Society, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/background.php>.

importation of black workers.<sup>8</sup> White families of higher status, however, appreciated the arrival of black people because domestic service was in high demand. Working-class immigrants from Europe usually distanced themselves from black people to rise in status. Black steel workers were paid less than white steel workers, and they were excluded from living in the nearby neighborhood called Morgan Park which was built in 1915 for the white U.S. Steel workers. Blacks were also excluded from using the Morgan Park Clubhouse which featured minstrel shows, a common entertainment form of the time that degraded black people. White actors in blackface performed five minstrel shows in front of full audiences across Duluth in 1920 alone.<sup>9</sup> Black people were not welcomed in these white-dominated spaces. Black steel workers lived in a nearby community called Gary which contained inadequate housing for 22% of Duluth's black residents. Though segregation was not enforced at the steel plant, black people in Duluth were refused service at certain restaurants and forced to sit in the balcony of a downtown movie theater.<sup>10</sup> Long-time black residents of Duluth recalled that racism was not a significant problem until after the war.<sup>11</sup> The practice of segregation was not unknown in Minnesota, and neither was lynching. The lynchings of Clayton, Jackson, and McGhie in 1920 were representative of a period of racial conflict in the United States.

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<sup>8</sup> Arnold R. Alanen, *Morgan Park Duluth, U.S. Steel, and the Forging of a Company Town* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 115.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 198.

<sup>10</sup> "A Small Black Community," Minnesota Historical Society, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/background.php>.

<sup>11</sup> Michael W. Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), 46.

Perhaps due to being far outnumbered by whites, Duluth's black population in the early 20th century kept quiet and to themselves. Accounts from black people who lived in Duluth indicate that some white people did not want black people living in their neighborhoods. Ethel Ray Nance was a civil-rights activist who was born in Duluth in 1899. She was the youngest daughter of an African American man and a Swedish-American woman who met in Minneapolis. Her parents moved to Duluth in 1889. Her father, William Henry Ray, worked on a passenger boat and in a hotel. The family briefly moved to Two Harbors before returning to Duluth in 1898. In an interview from 1974, Ethel recalled her father being antagonistic toward their racist white neighbors.<sup>12</sup> Before the Rays moved into their recently purchased home, William visited the house and walked around the back, during which the woman next door came out and said, "I hope you don't think you're going to live there". After William sarcastically said that he was thinking about it, the woman replied defiantly, "You won't live there".<sup>13</sup> After the Rays moved in, their neighbors built a fence between the houses. The family on the other side of the Rays' house was from England, and they were also antagonistic. A woman from the family moved the water pipe on the Rays' house so that when it rained water would go into the basement window. The hostility of the neighbors made William Henry Ray very bitter, and he instructed his children not to interact with the neighbors. He also taught them about what it meant to be black in America and read to them stories about lynchings from the Boston Guardian and The Crisis.<sup>14</sup> In June of 1920, Ethel Ray Nance

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<sup>12</sup> "Minnesota Black History Project: Interview with Ethel Ray Nance," *Mnhs.org*, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://collections.mnhs.org/cms/display?irn=10445842>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 4.



was working for the Forest Fires Relief Commission in Moose Lake, 43 miles south from Duluth, when she learned that there had been a “race riot” and three lynchings four blocks away from her family home. She was in disbelief upon hearing the news because, as she stated in her interview, “the negroes in Duluth are not that militant sort”.<sup>15</sup> Before the lynchings, Ethel’s father had attempted to start a local chapter of the NAACP in Duluth, but the black community saw no need for their own branch of the NAACP. Though segregation existed to an extent in Duluth, black residents believed that having their own organization would only further alienate them.<sup>16</sup> St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church served as Duluth’s center for the African American community. It is in the Central Hillside neighborhood which is uphill from downtown. Adjacent is the East Hillside neighborhood which, aside from Gary, housed most of the city’s black population.<sup>17</sup> Like many churches across the United States, AME helped African Americans establish fraternities, political clubs, and newspapers during the turn of the century.<sup>18</sup> The organization was founded in 1890, and its twenty-five members moved into the basement of a newly constructed church in 1900. Ten years later membership grew to sixty-eight people. The main level of the church was finished in

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<sup>15</sup> “Minnesota Black History Project: Interview with Ethel Ray Nance,” *Mnhs.org*, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://collections.mnhs.org/cms/display?irn=10445842>, 10.

<sup>16</sup> “Postcard from a Lynching: 2001 Documentary,” MPR News (MPR News, n.d.), accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2001/06/15/postcard-from-a-lynching-2001-documentary>.

<sup>17</sup> “History,” *St. Mark A.M.E. Church*, last modified June 6, 2020, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://stmark-ame.org/history/>.

<sup>18</sup> “St. Mark's AME Church, Duluth,” MNopedia, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.mnopedia.org/group/st-mark-s-ame-church-duluth>.

1913.<sup>19</sup> The following year membership declined to fifty-nine people. St. Mark AME church was the first and only building in Duluth built by and for black people. Many black organization members were also part of the local Masonic order which held meetings at the church. The existence of an African-American church and black organizations in Duluth during the early 1900's demonstrates the marginalization of the small black community at the time.

Racism was not the only form of marginalization in Minnesota in the early 1900's. Politics was a major source of division at the time and was used to demonize people who did not share the views of the majority. Joseph A. A. Burnquist was the governor of Minnesota from 1915 to 1921. He was a Republican and president of the Saint Paul branch of the NAACP. After the 1920 lynchings, he allowed the Minnesota national guard to secure Duluth from further mob violence. He also sent an adjutant to investigate the Duluth police department for their inadequate performance in handling the lynch mob. However, he did not commission an independent investigation of the lynchings despite multiple requests from the NAACP.<sup>20</sup> The actions of the governor of Minnesota suggest that he was more concerned about the competency of Duluth's law enforcement than bringing the lynch mob to justice.

When one examines Burnquist's record as governor, his career reflects a pro-war sentiment that contributed to intimidation toward people who did not fulfill their patriotic duties. In 1917 he created the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety (MCPS) which monitored the public's sentiments about the war. This seven-member organization was

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<sup>19</sup> "Minnesota Black History Project: Interview with Rev. Alphonse Reff," Mnhs.org, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://collections.mnhs.org/cms/display.php?irn=10445845>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

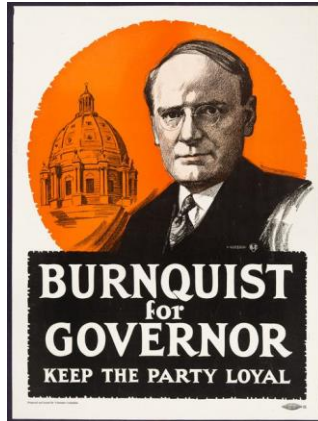
nonpartisan and opposed any actions it considered suspicious. Its power was only limited by the state and federal constitutions. Ensuring citizens' absolute loyalty to the United States was a priority of the group. Anyone who was not believed to be a patriot was considered a rebel. All non-citizens and their property were required to be registered in Duluth. Non-citizens were also restricted from owning guns and explosives. Immigrants were held in high suspicion by the MCPS. Minnesota schoolteachers were instructed to teach students solely in English.<sup>21</sup> Governor Burnquist disregarded party affiliation during his campaign. He divided people into those who were loyal and those who were disloyal. Burnquist gained the popular vote in Minnesota's gubernatorial election of 1918 among residents of Saint Louis county, of which Duluth is the county seat. He defeated Charles A. Lindbergh; the candidate endorsed by the Nonpartisan League (NPL). The NPL was founded in 1915 by Arthur C. Townley, a former Socialist Party member. It was designed to protect farmers in North Dakota. The NPL spread to Minnesota after 1916 and faced immediate opposition from the MCPS. Because Lindbergh opposed the United States entering the war, he and his supporters were considered disloyal. NPL members were labeled as Bolsheviks by Burnquist's allies. Though Lindbergh found supporters in cities across Minnesota, he faced backlash from law enforcement, citizens, and home guards who prevented NPL meetings. He was banned from speaking in Duluth in 1918.<sup>22</sup> NPL leaders were arrested, and Lindbergh was stoned, shot at, and had effigies

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<sup>21</sup> "Minnesota Commission of Public Safety," MNopedia, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.mnopedia.org/group/minnesota-commission-public-safety#:~:text=The%20Minnesota%20Commission%20of%20Public,the%20state%20from%20fo reign%20threats.>

<sup>22</sup> Michael W. Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), 44.

of him hanged.<sup>23</sup> Burnquist used loyalism to attract Democrat supporters, securing his victory.



*Image 1: Campaign poster for Joseph A. A. Burnquist from 1918<sup>24</sup>*

The success of Burnquist's run for governor in 1918 is reflective of the strong sense of patriotism among Minnesotans. Violence toward Lindbergh and his supporters showed the active hostility toward political minorities who were considered un-American.

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<sup>23</sup> "Nonpartisan League," MNopedia, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.mnopedia.org/group/nonpartisan-league>.

<sup>24</sup> "Burnquist for Governor - Keep the Party Loyal," Mnhs.org, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://collections.mnhs.org/cms/largerimage?irn=10397757&catirn=10322156&return=>

## Chapter Two: WWI, Anti-Left Politics, and the 1918 Lynching

Among Duluth's four victims of lynching between 1918 and 1920, the first was Olli Kinkkonen. He was murdered on September 18, 1918. News of his death did not expand very far. The Bottineau Courant in North Dakota, less than 500 miles away from Duluth was the only newspaper that I could find outside of Minnesota which discussed Kinkkonen's murder. The article focused on the Knights of Loyalty, which is called by their alternative name: the Knights of Liberty. The group committed violence without facing opposition, indicative of the power of mob rule over police authority.<sup>25</sup>

Finns in Minnesota had a poor reputation for their political views and actions which supported workers' rights. Kinkkonen shared the socialist views of many Finns in Minnesota.<sup>26</sup> Kinkkonen was born in Finland on June 10, 1880. He arrived in the United States on July 5, 1907 via Ellis Island and settled in Duluth, where he worked as a logger and dock worker at the Allouez ore docks. In 1913, there was an accident on Allouez dock in the neighboring city of Superior in Wisconsin. Two workers died as the result of a poor signaling procedure which was a commonly ignored problem by the Great Northern Railway Company.<sup>27</sup> Five hundred workers went on strike to demand better safety procedures. Members of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) supported

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<sup>25</sup> "DEATH FOLLOWS MOBS; Body of Finn Found Hanging After Being Tarred and Feathered. Gang Terrorists Took Him From Rooming Place And He Was Not Seen Until Corpse Was Discovered.," *The Bottineau Courant*, November 21, 1918, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> "Lynching in Lester Park," *Zenith City Online*, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://zenithcity.com/archive/legendary-tales/lynching-in-lester-park/>.

<sup>27</sup> Story by Heidi Bakk-Hansen. Originally published on Zenith City Online (2012–2017). Click here for more stories by Heidi Bakk-Hansen., "Duluth's Red Scare: The Wobblies," Zenith City Online, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://zenithcity.com/archive/legendary-tales/duluths-red-scare-the-wobblies/2/>.

the workers, urging them to demand for higher pay as well. Two prominent organizers of the I.W.W. were Frank Little and Leo Laukki. The strike was shut down by armed guards, and work was resumed. Dockworkers in Duluth went on strike in solidarity, and they were threatened with losing their jobs if they did not go back to work. Leo Laukki was attacked by private guards hired by a mining company while speaking to the protestors near the docks. The Duluth police department condemned the violence of the private guards, arguing that they could handle the strike themselves. Frank Little was later kidnapped and detained by armed guards on a farm in Carlton County which borders Saint Louis County. He was rescued by I.W.W. supporters, and, soon after, all strikers who worked for Duluth, Missabe, and Northern Railway were fired. The strikers were offered another chance to come back to earn 10 cents a day, but Finns would not be allowed to return.

In June of 1916 miners in the Mesabi Iron Range went on strike to demand better wages, they also received the support of the I.W.W. The county sheriff hired 1,000 armed guards to antagonize them during demonstrations. The fact that many of the workers on strike were foreign-born increased the suspicion toward immigrants.<sup>28</sup> The Iron Range was one of the most ethnically diverse areas of Minnesota. Finns were among the earliest immigrants to the region. After 1900, thousands of more immigrants arrived from southern and eastern Europe to work in the mines. The population stabilized after 1910, and Finns were the largest immigrant group. They made up a quarter of all immigrants in the Iron Range. Immigrants faced long work hours, low wages, dangerous work

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<sup>28</sup> Story by Heidi Bakk-Hansen. Originally published on Zenith City Online (2012–2017). Click here for more stories by Heidi Bakk-Hansen., “Duluth's Red Scare: The Wobblies,” Zenith City Online, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://zenithcity.com/archive/legendary-tales/duluths-red-scare-the-wobblies/2/>.

conditions, substandard housing, a high cost of living, and prejudice from other Americans. Northern and western Europeans were given the best paying jobs while southern and eastern Europeans worked the least desirable jobs. The latter groups were considered physically and intellectually inferior to the former. Community leaders looked down on immigrants for their “immorality” and political radicalism. Immigrants coped with their challenges by forming institutions such as socialist worker halls and fraternal societies. Additionally, they created boarding houses and newspapers.<sup>29</sup> Though institutions were segregated by ethnicity in the beginning, immigrant miners solidified as workers and organized a strike in 1907. The second strike in the summer of 1916 had several clashes between workers and law enforcement. In the violence, a deputy sheriff was killed along with a Finnish soda distributor. After this incident, the St. Louis County Sheriff arrested some of the I.W.W. leaders on the charge of murder. Furthermore, Governor Burnquist outlawed pickets against strikebreakers.<sup>30</sup> The strike ended in September, and the I.W.W. leaders were released from jail in December.

The United States entered World War One in April of 1917. At the time, one third of the American population were immigrants or the children of immigrants. The largest immigrant group was Germans, of which Minnesota had a large population. German Americans were reluctant to fight against their home country. Additionally, numbers of Finns and Eastern Europeans who immigrated to the United States did not want to join

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<sup>29</sup> “Immigration to the Iron Range, 1880–1930,” MNopedia, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.mnopedia.org/immigration-iron-range-1880-1930>.

<sup>30</sup> “Mesabi Iron Range Strike, 1916,” MNopedia, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.mnopedia.org/event/mesabi-iron-range-strike-1916>.

the Entente Powers which included Tsarist Russia.<sup>31</sup> Woodrow Wilson was the president from 1913 to 1921. He was sympathetic to old-stock Americans and encouraged the total assimilation of European immigrants. Southern and Eastern Europeans were vilified because they retained customs from Europe which were considered barriers to American progress. Immigrants made up a large component of industrial, metal mining, and timber workers in the Upper Midwest. The demand for labor increased as the Allies demanded \$2 billion worth of supplies. The stimulation of labor in the North pulled African Americans from the South who sought employment. Employers showed negligence in the well-being of workers, as working hours became longer, production was rushed, and safety procedures were inadequate. These conditions prompted workers to unionize and go on strike. By 1918, the United States federal government responded to worker disobedience by creating numerous organizations led by corporate elites designed to monitor “anti-war” activity and facilitate the war effort. In December of 1915, Woodrow Wilson stated in his State of the Union address that immigrants within the United States posed the gravest threat to “national peace and safety”. He believed that some immigrants spread their ideas of disloyalty, and therefore should be “crushed out”.<sup>32</sup> When Woodrow Wilson proposed to go to war in 1917, he emphasized that he held no hostility toward German people, especially those who lived in America. Loyal immigrants, Wilson believed, would help fellow Americans control the few who may have disloyal intentions

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<sup>31</sup> Allen Ruff, “Dawn of ‘Total War’ and the Surveillance State,” *Against the Current*, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc190/p5060/>.

<sup>32</sup> “State of the Union Address: Woodrow Wilson (December 7, 1915),” *Infoplease* (Infoplease, n.d.), accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.infoplease.com/primary-sources/government/presidential-speeches/state-union-address-woodrow-wilson-december-7-1915>.



“with a stern hand of firm repression”.<sup>33</sup> In Wilson’s Flag Day address, he argued that Germany was using socialists and leaders of labor as their spokesmen. The spokesmen had supposedly learned to be discrete and existed in all levels of society. They, “proclaim the liberal purposes of their masters: declare this a foreign war which can touch America with no danger to either her lands or her institutions... and seek to undermine the government with false professions of loyalty to its principles”.<sup>34</sup> Hostility toward immigrants increased after the Selective Service Act was passed in May of 1917 because it exempted non-citizens. All other men between the ages of 21 and 31 were required to register for the draft. The Justice Department’s Bureau of Investigation tracked people who failed to register. The Espionage Act of 1917 criminalized opposition to conscription. Thousands of individuals were suspected of being a spy, but not one was proven to be involved in any act of sabotage. The Sedition Act of 1918 made any criticism of the war and the American government illegal. The Committee on Public Information (CPI) was signed into existence by President Wilson in April of 1917. It promoted the war through propaganda and demonized any opposition. The CPI encouraged the public to report anyone who called for peace to the Justice Department. Along with the Department of Justice and Bureau of Investigation, the Military Intelligence Division (MID) also surveilled Americans for any antiwar activity. In

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<sup>33</sup> “Transcript of Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War Against Germany (1917),” Our Documents - Transcript of Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War Against Germany (1917), accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=61&page=transcript>.

<sup>34</sup> “Address on Flag Day,” Address on Flag Day | The American Presidency Project, last modified June 14, 1917, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-flag-day>.

November of 1918, the MID consisted of a national network of undercover offices and agents who led numerous police departments, private detectives, labor spies, and patriotic groups.<sup>35</sup> The American Protective League (APL) was an organization which assisted the BI and MID. It consisted of a quarter million volunteers across 1,400 areas of the country. Members engaged in numerous activities including slandering and detaining citizens, infiltrating labor organizations, and burglarizing offices.<sup>36</sup> They conducted raids looking for people who did not register for the draft, interrogating thousands between April and September of 1918. In Duluth, a division of the APL was formed just before the United States entered the war. The group had 208 members, all of whom were prominent businessmen. They were divided into seven divisions, one of which was “steamboat and docks”. According to historian Walter Van Brunt, the Duluth division of the APL held the record for the most arrests, detentions, deportations to federal prisons, and captured slackers of any district. The Duluth division disbanded on April 1, 1919. Twenty-five days later, a book was announced in the Duluth News Tribune which was said to give a detailed account of the division’s activities. Though there is no evidence that the book was ever written, the story in the newspaper stated that members of the APL “worked as silently and effectively as the Ku Klux Klan”.<sup>37</sup> Surveillance networks most often targeted leftist groups and individuals, especially the I.W.W., the Socialist Party, and the Nonpartisan League (NPL). Labor movements had long been targeted by

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<sup>35</sup> Allen Ruff, “Dawn of ‘Total War’ and the Surveillance State,” *Against the Current*, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc190/p5060/>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> “Zenith City Online,” Zenith City Online, last modified January 6, 2021, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://zenithcity.com/thisday/april-26-1919-news-tribune-announces-book-about-duluths-role-in-secret-war/>.

various levels of governments across the country controlled by business leaders who were assisted by law enforcement. Federal action against political dissidents emboldened informal groups to take matters into their own hands by targeting and murdering people who were considered “Pro-Kaiser”. Though the I.W.W. was anti-militarism, they were not explicitly anti-war. However, their efforts for obtaining workers’ rights were considered impediments to the war effort.

Frank Little organized strikes across the country. He stopped in Butte, Montana on July 17, 1917 to assist in forming a copper miner’s strike against the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. During his stay, he spoke out against the United States’ involvement in the war. He angered the press and the mining company when he called soldiers “Uncle Sam’s scabs in uniform”.<sup>38</sup> Anaconda was worried that copper input would be reduced.<sup>39</sup> On July 31, 1917, Little was taken from a rooming house by six men, tied to the end of a truck, and dragged out of town. He was found the next morning hanging from a railway trestle bridge. There was a note attached to his leg that warned others what will happen if they criticize the government or military. Little’s murderers were never caught. The identity of the abductors remains uncertain, but their tactics and

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<sup>38</sup> “I.W.W. STRIKE CHIEF LYNCHED AT BUTTE; Frank Little Taken from Home by Six Masked Men in Auto and Hanged to Bridge. VIGILANTES’ SIGN ON BODY Agitator Called Our Troops ‘Scabs In Uniform’ and Denounced American Government. Wounded on the Head. Slurred American Troops. Unwise, Says Prosecutor. CAUSED RIOTS IN FRESNO. MICHIGAN DISTRICT GUARDED.,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, n.d.), accessed April 17, 2021, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1917/08/02/102355431.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Story by Heidi Bakk-Hansen. Originally published on Zenith City Online (2012–2017). Click here for more stories by Heidi Bakk-Hansen., “Duluth’s Red Scare: The Wobblies,” *Zenith City Online*, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://zenithcity.com/archive/legendary-tales/duluths-red-scare-the-wobblies/2/>.

motives were very similar to the ones used by the Knights of Loyalty against Kinkkonen. Kinkkonen's murder cannot be considered unique. It was characteristic of the time.

In the first week of September, federal officials raided I.W.W. buildings and confiscated any materials that suggested sabotage. They also raided the office of a Finnish newspaper called *Industrialisti* which was published by Leo Laukki. Nothing was found to demonstrate rebellion or disloyalty. Two days later, an area of Duluth known as Finn Town was raided by federal and local officials. Sixty-seven Finns were arrested for not being able to show their draft registration cards. Twenty-eight of them were released the next day because they were too old to be drafted. Laukki was charged with hindering the American cause in fighting Germany, antagonizing citizens who produce military equipment, and obstructing the government from increasing members of the military. Out of the thousands of people arrested for being slackers, only a few were actual draft-dodgers.<sup>40</sup>

On September 11th, 1918, the day before Kinkkonen registered for the draft, he cancelled and surrendered his first papers. He was one of six aliens in Duluth who renounced their citizenship to avoid fighting in the war. It is not agreed upon what Kinkkonen's justification for surrendering his papers was. Some believe that he was a radical who considered the war to be unjust, others believe that he was simply a peaceful man who wanted to avoid conflict. It is possible that he was one of the many Finns who emigrated from Finland to avoid being conscripted into the Russian army. At the time,

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<sup>40</sup> Story by Heidi Bakk-Hansen. Originally published on Zenith City Online (2012–2017). Click here for more stories by Heidi Bakk-Hansen., "Duluth's Red Scare: The Wobblies," *Zenith City Online*, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://zenithcity.com/archive/legendary-tales/duluths-red-scare-the-wobblies/2/>.

the Democratic-leaning Duluth Herald and Republican-leaning Duluth News Tribune were filled with developments on the war, including the names of soldiers who were killed.<sup>41</sup> The Duluth Herald announced Kinkkonen's decision to relinquish his citizenship, identified him as a Finn, and released his address. Kinkkonen was classified as a non-neutral, so he was not exempt from military service.<sup>42</sup> Kinkkonen's Finnish identity and opposition to the war made him a target for a group of self-proclaimed American patriots. His death was considered the proper punishment for refusing to fight. The Knights of Loyalty targeted slackers for "whatever the cost".<sup>43</sup> A piece from the Morning Tulsa Daily World published March 24, 1918, informed readers that the Knights of Liberty was active in Minnesota. The group warned German sympathizers to stay silent or expect to be penalized. The Knights of Liberty was supposedly a national organization which aimed to eradicate Pro-Germanism. Two men who were accused of being German sympathizers in Duluth, Minnesota had received a note which included their names and addresses. It demanded that the men not say or do anything more that goes against the United States. At the end of the warning, it said: "If the law cannot reach you we can, and we will".<sup>44</sup> The Knights of Liberty arrived at the boarding house where

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<sup>41</sup> "MPR: Postcard From A Lynching," *News & Features*, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/projects/2001/06/lynching/olli.shtml>.

<sup>42</sup> "TWO MORE SLACKERS RELINQUISH CITIZENSHIP," *Duluth Herald*, September 17, 1918.

<sup>43</sup> Jimmy Lovrien, "Finnish Immigrant Was 'Victim of Warmongers' 100 Years Ago in Duluth," *Duluth News Tribune* (Duluth News Tribune, September 18, 2018), <https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news/4500591-finnish-immigrant-was-victim-warmongers-100-years-ago-duluth>.

<sup>44</sup> "Knights of Liberty Active in Minnesota," *Tulsa Daily World*, March 24, 1918, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/71215787/?terms=knightsof+liberty&match=1>.The Morning.

Kinkkonen stayed and told him that they were the draft board. They then abducted him and brought him to the neighborhood called Congdon Park. They tarred and feathered him as a warning to all slackers. They notified the paper via phone and mail, claiming that there were 2,000 members of the Knights of Liberty in Duluth who would continue to attack people who were accused of being slackers. Kinkkonen was reported missing to the Duluth police by his landlord after he had not returned to the house by midnight.<sup>45</sup> Nearly two weeks later he was discovered hanging from a tree in Lester Park which at the time was on the outskirts of Duluth. Despite knowledge of Kinkkonen's abduction, authorities determined his death to be a suicide due to humiliation for being tarred and feathered. The Duluth News Tribune agreed with the determination of his cause of death. Censorship of foreign-language newspapers was prevalent during wartime, which might explain why the Finnish left-wing press did not push for further investigation of the hanging.<sup>46</sup> Differing perspectives on the war would have also been prevented from being read by the public. As a result, people were either too afraid to challenge the Knights of Liberty or thought that they were supporting the American cause. Jack Carney, editor of a local socialist newspaper, disagreed with the claim that Kinkkonen committed suicide. He argued that Kinkkonen's convictions intimidated the businessmen of Duluth.<sup>47</sup> The

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<sup>45</sup> On This Date in Minnesota History, "On This Date in Minnesota History: September 18," *On This Date in Minnesota History: September 18*, last modified September 18, 2018, accessed April 17, 2021, [https://pjefamilyresearch.blogspot.com/2018/09/on-this-date-in-minnesota-history\\_18.html](https://pjefamilyresearch.blogspot.com/2018/09/on-this-date-in-minnesota-history_18.html).

<sup>46</sup> Arnold R. Alanen, *Finns in Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

lack of control by authorities over the Knights of Loyalty explains why such a lynching could occur. The individuals responsible for the lynching were never identified.

### **Chapter Three: Racism and the 1920 Lynchings**

On June 15, 1920, the story of an assault on James Sullivan and Irene Tusken by six black circus roustabouts outraged white residents of Duluth. The Duluth Herald published an article titled “West Duluth Girl Victim of Six Negroes” which described what happened the previous night from the perspective of Sullivan, who first told the story to his father the next morning. Sullivan claimed that while he and Tusken were watching the workers take down equipment at the end of the night, six of them approached the couple. One of them held a pistol, and they forced the couple to go behind a bush where Tusken was “ravished”. The couple was reportedly allowed to leave afterwards. Mr. Sullivan reported the incident to the police, and the circus was stopped from leaving Duluth. Twice the number of alleged attackers were detained at the city jail. Though Sullivan’s story had little credibility, the newspaper headline triggered a massive response among thousands of white residents in Duluth who later that day broke into the city jail and lynched three of the accused black men.

The racial identity of Clayton, Jackson, and McGhie should be taken into context with their occupation as circus workers. In the 1920s, circus workers were looked down upon by people across the United States. Fights were common between circus workers and aggressive locals. Black circus workers were presumed to have criminal intentions. They were not respected by their own employers. Their real names were never used, they were given the most labor-intensive tasks, and no concern was given for their safety. If a circus worker were to become incapacitated, they would get left behind. The John Robinson Circus continued without any concern for the thirteen black workers who were arrested in Minnesota. Despite the dangers of being a circus hand, young black men



sought work in the circus to escape the racism that surrounded them. They primarily came from cities situated next to railroads. Being a circus worker meant that they could travel across the country with other black people and get paid.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, black circus workers were still susceptible to racism and threats to their life. Before the John Robinson Circus arrived in town, the Duluth commissioner of public safety, William Murnian, told Police Chief John Murphy to tell the circus manager to keep their black employees in line. When Chief Murphy met with the circus manager, he was assured that the black employees were “quiet and mannerly and would pose no problems to the Duluth Police”. Chief Murphy informed the circus manager that the residents of West Duluth were not friendly to black folk, so it was best for the black employees to avoid that part of town.<sup>49</sup> Commissioner Murnian and Chief Murphy were not so much concerned about the welfare of the black circus workers as they were about the potential for civil unrest.

James Sullivan lived in West Duluth. As a dockworker, he earned \$40 dollars more per month than married men who lived in his part of town. His high pay was due to his father being a superintendent at the grain terminal.<sup>50</sup> Due to James’ arrogance and promiscuity, he was not liked by most adults who knew him. However, P. B. Sullivan was fond of his son who he perceived to take after himself. James Sullivan’s story

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<sup>48</sup> Story by Heidi Bakk-Hansen. Originally published on Zenith City Online (2012–2017). Click here for more stories by Heidi Bakk-Hansen., “The Victims of the 1920 Duluth Lynchings,” *Zenith City Online*, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://zenithcity.com/archive/legendary-tales/the-victims-of-the-1920-duluth-lynchings/2/>.

<sup>49</sup> Michael W. Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), 26.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

alarmed Chief Murphy, who took immediate action. Rape was not a common crime in Duluth.<sup>51</sup> The fact that this alleged crime was committed by non-local black circus workers would have made this crime seem especially heinous. Chief Murphy got a hold of the Duluth, Winnipeg, and Pacific yardmaster via telephone, halting the circus train. When the police arrived at the railyard, they ordered every black worker to get out of the train. Nearly 120 blacks were lined up outside. The line was narrowed down to about forty workers who would have been working near the menagerie tent the previous night. James was asked to identify the six alleged attackers. James could not select any men, stating that he could not tell them apart. When Irene Tusken was brought to the scene, she picked five men who supposedly fit the size of her attackers. Eight others were arrested after being interrogated by the police. All 13 men were brought to the police station as the train continued. After two hours of interrogation at the police station, seven workers were released. The six remaining men were between the ages of 19 and 22 and were with the circus the previous April in Peru, Indiana, where other black workers had also been accused of assaulting a white girl. However, those individuals no longer worked for the circus.<sup>52</sup> While it is possible that an assault had happened in Indiana, it seems possible that the story was among many others which were made up to torment black men and perpetuate white suspicion toward black people. The six arrested men were put in jail cells. Though capital punishment was abolished in Minnesota, Chief Murphy believed that the six men deserved death and more for the crime they supposedly committed.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Michael W. Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), 37.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

Sullivan's story about the assault at the circus grounds angered many young men in West Duluth. Rather than allowing the law to handle the suspects, men took the opportunity to "defend" helpless women, as the veterans did in France.<sup>54</sup> The word of the supposed rape had spread rapidly across Duluth before the press released the news later that night. Certain white residents of West Duluth found it unfair that if convicted of rape, the six prisoners would only spend thirty years in prison. It would be up to the people to ensure that the prisoners suffered what was considered a "reasonable" punishment.<sup>55</sup> As the mob was growing in the hours leading up to the lynching, it became obvious that there were no distinct groups or leaders of the mob beside the initial gang of men from West Duluth who started recruiting people in the streets of downtown. They were assisted by people who did not join the mob but supported their cause, including a clerk at the hardware store across the street from the station who gave some young men yards of free rope, telling them "You're doing a good thing".<sup>56</sup> The officers at the station were aware of what was happening, and were nervously taking precautions. Sergeant Olson considered moving the prisoners outside of the prison to a more secure location, but ultimately decided it was too risky. Once people started throwing bricks at the police station, two district judges tried to dissuade the crowd, saying that a lynching would stain Duluth and its people like it did in Omaha. One man responded that they were simply

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<sup>54</sup> Michael W. Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), 48.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>56</sup> John D. Bessler, *Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs And Executions in Minnesota* (Univ of Minnesota Pr, 2006), 188.

carrying out the execution themselves rather than waiting for the judges to do it.<sup>57</sup>

Members of the mob had convinced themselves that the prisoners were guilty and believed that the prisoners would eventually be executed for their accused crime. Their intense anger drove them to take the power of the judge, jury, and executioner as a way of speeding the process that they were sure would happen. This anger was partly fueled by rumors that Irene had died after a group of people asked Mrs. Tusken how Irene was doing. Mrs. Tusken replied that she was in bed, but people misheard and thought she said “dead”. Though the crowd was getting dangerous, Commissioner Murnian at the police station told a reporter that he did “not want to see the blood of one white person spilled for six blacks”. Commissioner Murnian clearly sympathized with the working-class mob, many members of which elected him to his position.<sup>58</sup> Once the mob broke into the jail, an attorney named Hugh McClearn tried to stop men from destroying the cell room door by standing on a stepladder in the hallway, saying that three of the black men may be innocent. A man in the crowd said that they did not care if the men are guilty or innocent. They just wanted to “kill the black snakes”.<sup>59</sup> When the crowd learned McClearn was an attorney, they asked him what the prisoners would face if convicted, since there was no death penalty in Minnesota. McClearn replied five to thirty years, which made him lose the respect and attention of the crowd. The mob made their way into the cells, removed McGhie from his cell, and interrogated him in Clayton’s cell. Both men were badly beaten and continuously professed their innocence. While some mob members began to

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<sup>57</sup> John D. Bessler, *Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs And Executions in Minnesota* (Univ of Minnesota Pr, 2006), 189.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 191.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 192.

realize the difficult nature of this process, the majority decided to convict both men along with Jackson, who was shoved out of his cell after the mob demanded to be given someone. The three men were dragged to a lamppost where they were lynched one by one. The lynching was a spectacle to the crowd which gathered around. Many people demanded the bodies of the victims to be hoisted high so that they could see. People were shouting, laughing, and cheering. Afterwards, a photograph was taken of the lynchings with a large group of white people flanking the bodies, looking at the camera. The photograph was made into a postcard. The idea that the lynching victims were human beings that were murdered did not seem to have any effect on the consciences of the mob. They were treated like animals who were killed for sport. The manner of their deaths reflects the general attitude toward black people at the time.

The actions of the lynch mob certainly seem reflective of something the Ku Klux Klan would do. In fact, the Ku Klux Klan established a presence in Minnesota in 1921. The Duluth chapter started in the spring with 700 members. Many white citizens wanted to feel a part of something, and they turned to the Klan which represented white, Christian, and American values. The press humanized the Klan, including the Duluth Herald which in August of 1921 published a piece stating that most members of the Klan were men with good intentions. It goes on to say that though the Klan had a limited knowledge of history, reform was all that was needed for them to realize the danger of autocratic power in the court system which their ancestors fought to get rid of. The article ends by stating that Klan members were not bad citizens, and that they “fairly represent public opinion in the places where they flourish”. Klan membership in Duluth reportedly

grew to 1,500 members by the next year.<sup>60</sup> Among the members who joined in the 1920s was Sergeant Oscar Olson who was present at the Duluth jail when the black roustabouts were abducted. His name was in a list of Duluth Klan members in 1925-1926 which included a county commissioner.<sup>61</sup> The Ku Klux Klan's presence in Duluth represented a dominant white-supremacist perspective which permeated all levels of society.

A week and a half after the lynchings of Clayton, Jackson, and McGhie, another newspaper called the Duluth Rip-Saw published an article titled "Negroes did Not Rape Girl" which explains that there was no evidence that the men lynched raped Irene Tusken. The article then described the decline of society in Duluth which, at the time, had been experiencing an upward swing in violence. The journalist implied that those who regularly engaged in violent or immoral activity also took part in the lynch mob. These men were able to commit violence because they outnumbered the police and were not fired upon when they broke into the jail, kidnapped three men, and lynched them. Many members of the mob left the scene before police could arrest all persons responsible. The writer of the newspaper article, while clearly disgusted with those who participated in the lynching, still depicted black males in a negative manner. The author wrote that the men falsely confessed due to their "primitive Negro character", and people who knew James Sullivan considered him to be "as dangerous to a young girl as a Negro circus hand". The author's failure to condemn racism along with lynching reflects opposition to lynching as

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<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle and Nancy H. Vaillancourt, "One Flag, One School, One Language: Minnesota's Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's", *Minnesota History* (vol. 61, Winter 2009-10), Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>61</sup> "KKK in Minnesota? Yes, It Happened Here, Book Documents," *Duluth News Tribune* (Duluth News Tribune, December 1, 2013), last modified December 1, 2013, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/opinion/2454381-kkk-minnesota-yes-it-happened-here-book-documents>.

a matter of maintaining an image of civility more so than defending civil rights. The author of the article shared the same racist views as the lynch mob. It is possible that other Duluth residents also shared racist beliefs while being opposed to the lynchings. The widespread prejudice toward black males at the time made it possible for three black men to be accused of a crime and lynched based on no evidence other than their race.

The Duluth Rip-Saw published another article in the same week titled “The City’s Shame” which provides an even more sympathetic view toward the lynch victims. The article suggests that the police did not try to the best of their ability to protect the prisoners from the mob, failing to strategize and uphold their duty. This is because the twenty-five available police officers sympathized with the lynch mob, composed of violent criminals.<sup>62</sup> The writer lamented the absence of the late Duluth Police Chief Chauncey Troyer, who would have prevented the lynch mob from taking control. Troyer passed away in November of 1919. He stood out during his time as chief for his effort to eradicate prostitution, opium, gambling, and illegal sale of liquor in Duluth’s St. Croix District.<sup>63</sup> The police department appears to have declined since his death under different leadership. The end of the article finally argues for the proper salary to be paid to competent police officers who are currently living on “starvation wages”. This final statement suggests that the police officers may not have been motivated to stop the lynch mob because it did not seem to be worth their income.

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<sup>62</sup> “Duluth Lynchings,” Minnesota Historical Society, June 26, 1920, [http://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/The\\_Citys\\_Shame-82.001.php](http://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/The_Citys_Shame-82.001.php).

<sup>63</sup> “Zenith City Online,” Zenith City Online, October 23, 2019, <http://zenithcity.com/thisday/november-13-1919-death-of-long-time-duluth-police-chief-chauncey-troyer/>.

The Burnquist Papers from The Crisis published in August of 1920 consists of an investigation into the lynchings by the governor of Minnesota, Joseph A. A. Burnquist, president of the Saint Paul chapter of the NAACP. Investigators sent to Duluth learned that the police were aware that a lynch mob was forming at least two hours before the lynchings happened. Trucks of men dragging a rope drove along the main streets and past the police station. They made public announcements that Irene Tusken was dying, and they invited people to join the “necktie party”, or lynch mob. In the trucks they carried ropes, hammers, saws to cut bars, and timbers to serve as battering rams. The Commissioner of Safety ordered the police not to use firearms to prevent bloodshed.<sup>64</sup> The police could have warned anyone who planned to participate in the lynch mob that there would be consequences. Instead, the police decided to stay idle and let the lynch mob be carried out because they valued the lives of white criminals over innocent black men.

In the aftermath of the lynchings, a grand jury considered Commissioner William F. Murnian unfit for his job due to his failure to act sufficiently to defend the prisoners from the lynch mob. The station was reportedly called as early as 2:30 pm by someone who overheard plans being discussed to form a mob at a West Duluth poolroom. Police officers at the front of the station later that evening witnessed the truck of men attempting to rally people for the mob but made no effort to stop the truck and arrest the men. It is unclear what the commissioner's directions were when the mob arrived at the station.

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<sup>64</sup> “Duluth Lynchings,” *The Crisis*, Vol. 20, No. 4, August 1920, cover and pages 179 and 195., August 1, 1920, [https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/The\\_Crisis\\_Vol\\_20\\_No\\_4\\_August\\_1920\\_cover\\_and\\_pages\\_179\\_and\\_195-84.001.php](https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/The_Crisis_Vol_20_No_4_August_1920_cover_and_pages_179_and_195-84.001.php).



Some officers claim that they were told not to use guns and clubs because innocent people in the crowd could be harmed. However, they heard these directions from other officers, not the sergeant. Murnian verified to the grand jury and the press that he gave such directions, but later rejected the claim to the governor's investigation commission.<sup>65</sup> Though it seems from this article that the police were ill-prepared to hold back a mob, other articles from the Duluth Herald tells a different story about the police department on the night of the lynchings. The police reportedly took every precaution to prevent the mob from breaking into the jail. They barricaded and guarded the doors and called every off-duty officer to report.<sup>66</sup> Commissioner Murnian said that even with a larger police force they could not stop the mob. They only gave up after the last officer was overpowered.<sup>67</sup> The fire department used the fire hose to disperse the mob, but the hose was taken from them and used on the officers. The police were unable to stop the mob from climbing through the fire escapes and battering a hole in the wall through which the victims were dragged through. The last people to attempt to prevent the lynchings from taking place included two priests who pleaded with the crowd but failed to stop them.

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<sup>65</sup> "Duluth Lynchings," Murnian Declared Unfit For His Job., June 13, 1920, [https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/Murnian\\_Declared\\_Unfit\\_For\\_His\\_Job-779.001.php](https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/Murnian_Declared_Unfit_For_His_Job-779.001.php).

<sup>66</sup> "Duluth Lynchings," Infuriated Mob Takes Three Negroes from Police Station Hanging Them to Light Pole., June 16, 1920, [https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/Infuriated\\_Mob\\_Takes\\_Three\\_Negroes\\_from\\_Police\\_Station\\_Hanging\\_Them\\_to\\_Light\\_Pole-105.001.php](https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/Infuriated_Mob_Takes_Three_Negroes_from_Police_Station_Hanging_Them_to_Light_Pole-105.001.php).

<sup>67</sup> "Duluth Lynchings," Police Forbidden to Use Their Firearms to Withhold Rioters., June 16, 1920, [https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/Police\\_Forbidden\\_to\\_Use\\_Their\\_Firearms\\_to\\_Withhold\\_Rioters-106.001.php](https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/Police_Forbidden_to_Use_Their_Firearms_to_Withhold_Rioters-106.001.php).

The Minneapolis Journal makes the point that had Clayton, Jackson, and McGhie been white, they would have faced “calm processes of the law” for their charge.<sup>68</sup> A connection is drawn to the sudden nature of racial violence that is prevalent in the Deep South, which seems to have penetrated Minnesota, a state the article claims only had two lynchings in its history including the one in Duluth. The first recorded lynching was twenty years prior and did not involve a black victim. It seems that the lynchings of 1920 were the result of Minnesotans finding an opportunity to “protect” their race during a time of racial violence across the United States.

Acknowledging the aftermath of the lynchings is necessary to understanding the legal system that existed at the time. The subsequent trials demonstrate the dominant perspectives in Duluth which favored the white rioters over the black prisoners. When Irene Tusken was interviewed by detective Morgan from the Employer’s Detective Service three days after the lynchings, Morgan noted that Tusken seemed indifferent to her alleged assault. She could not seem to remember details about her attackers, and her account of her actions afterwards did not seem consistent with someone who was sexually assaulted. After conferring with her doctor, who told him that his examinations did not indicate that she was raped, he delivered his report with the detective agency, and the report made its way to Governor Burnquist. The report was filed away and was never seen by any attorneys for the remaining black prisoners.<sup>69</sup> The fact that thirteen black men were still being tried for a rape of which there was little evidence for, while not one

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<sup>68</sup> “Duluth Lynchings,” *The Duluth Disgrace*, June 17, 1920, [https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/The\\_Duluth\\_Disgrace-89.001.php](https://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/The_Duluth_Disgrace-89.001.php).

<sup>69</sup> Michael W. Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), 134.

white individual was convicted for the murder of three black men demonstrates the ugly nature of the justice system in Minnesota in the 1920's. The mob had the law on their side before, during, and after three lynchings. The small resistance from officers the mob faced while storming the jail was not enacted in full force, since the police were sympathetic toward the mob. In the trials during the following months, only two members of the mob were convicted of rioting or inciting to riot. Max Mason, one of the black prisoners, was convicted of rape and sentenced to thirty years in prison, despite testifying that he was loading seats into boxcars at the time of the attack. He was convicted on the basis that he tested positive for gonorrhea, of which Irene Tusken had an advanced case. Max Mason repeatedly denied having gonorrhea and asked for another physician. He was sentenced to thirty years in prison. His conviction comforted residents of Duluth, knowing that someone was held accountable for raping a white woman.<sup>70</sup> A conviction also washed any guilt over the three lynchings, since by association, the three lynching victims were guilty. Fortunately, six of the other black men had charges dropped by the judge, and the remaining prisoners were no longer set to be prosecuted.<sup>71</sup> Max Mason was released after serving four years.

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<sup>70</sup> Michael W. Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), 153.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 154.

## **Conclusion**

The lynchings of Olli Kinkkonen, Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie were committed by people who felt threatened and wanted to assert their power. Duluth was a city of immigrants. The entry of the United States into World War One made northern Minnesota an important region for producing materials and goods. Immigrants from Eastern Europe and African Americans migrated into the area to find employment as labor demand increased. The arrival of these unwelcome groups angered a great number of white men who felt that they were losing their status as war heroes or hard workers. Some immigrants themselves assimilated into the dominant culture and became complicit in discrimination. An individual who avoided the draft or was accused of rape gave white people an excuse to exercise violence on immigrants and black people, respectively. At a time when lynching was a popular form of punishment, one leftist Finn and three black circus workers were murdered in that fashion in turn for their “immoral” behavior. The sources that I have gathered indicate that mob rule had power over law enforcement. This shows that perhaps the police permitted acts of violence to occur due to their lack of concern over certain issues, or that they were outnumbered by the people who engaged in violent crime. Another important realization is that the time during and after the United States’ involvement in World War One gave rise to various government organizations whose interests favored old-stock, protestant, white Americans. Their propaganda demonized immigrants, workers who unionized, leftists, and anyone who did not actively support the war. The United States government emboldened thousands of individuals to create their own groups and terrorize anyone who seemed suspicious. Targets included people who seemed anti-American and

threatening to white American values. People in various positions of power backed the policies held by the government, and any opposition that came to attention was quickly eliminated. The time of the lynchings correlates with a time of anti-Finnish sentiment in the Midwest and was shortly after the Red Summer. It makes sense that a primarily white, natural-born American population in the early 20th century would permit acts of violence toward political dissidents, immigrants, and racial minorities. This does not mean that every person thought that the lynchings were justified. However, many people did, or were at least complicit, including law enforcement and the press.

Approximately one hundred years later, America is going through a time of enormous unrest. The country is in the middle of a coronavirus pandemic, and unrest has broken out multiple times over the unjust murders of black Americans at the hands of law enforcement. While there have not been any lynch mobs, it is important to recognize the parallels between the present and past. Understanding why something happened in the past can help one understand the context of current events. The same structures that existed in the 1920's survive in some form in the present. The media still enforces a dominant narrative, people are still dying in police custody, and pro-war narratives shape American politics.

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